

December 24 Lesson 4

Faithful Seekers OF THE King

Devotional Reading: [Isaiah 49:1-7](#)

Background Scripture: [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

MATTHEW 2:1-12

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:” ⁶ ““But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.””



⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

KEY VERSE

On coming to the house, [the Magi] saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.—[Matthew 2:11](#)

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Introduction

A. Thanks, but No Thanks!

It's often very hard to find the perfect Christmas gift! Even so, the worst Christmas gifts are relatively well established in cultural tradition. For example, such tradition tells us that fruitcake is the proverbial unwanted holiday present. Not far behind is the so-called ugly Christmas sweater. It is probably best not to give food that will never be eaten or clothes that will never be worn!

Common sense also can spot a bad gift idea. Does a loved one really need to be reminded of neglected housework by the gift of a vacuum cleaner? Does a friend need a hint to lose weight by the gift of a gym membership? Would a gift of deodorant be the best way to tell a coworker that he or she has a problem in that area? An insult wrapped up in a festive box and adorned with a ribbon is still an insult!

When we give gifts, we want to give something that is appreciated. That is all the more true in this season of giving and receiving gifts. Today's text examines noteworthy gift givers of history. We can get some tips about giving—especially giving to God—from them.

B. Lesson Background

Herod the Great (ruled 37-4 BC) was the first Roman puppet king of Judea. Although ruler of the Jews, Herod was of Arabic and Idumean descent. (The latter are descended from the Edomites of [Genesis 36:9](#); etc.) While Herod professed a commitment to Judaism, his racial background, wildly excessive lifestyle, and absolute loyalty to Rome led many Jews to question his true beliefs.

Herod is perhaps most famous for his massive public building projects, including a renovation and expansion of the Jerusalem temple complex (compare [John 2:20](#)). Profoundly paranoid, Herod maintained a large personal bodyguard who also functioned as a secret police. Through this force Herod eliminated enemies real and perceived (including members of his own family) and otherwise squelched dissent. It is in such a setting of paranoia that the events of today's lesson take place.

I. Making the Effort

([Matthew 2:1, 2](#))

A. Long Trip ([v. 1](#))

^{1a} After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod,

Bethlehem, a country village some six miles south of Jerusalem, is well known as the hometown of the great king David ([1 Samuel 17:12](#)). The designation *Bethlehem in Judea* distinguishes this town from a different Bethlehem in [Joshua 19:15](#). Matthew clarifies the location not for the sake of geographical precision, however, but to stress the connection between Jesus and his ancestor David, who had been promised that his descendants would reign forever ([2 Samuel 7](#)).

Ten centuries after David's death, God is working to fulfill this ancient prophecy in an unexpected way. Regarding the nature of *King Herod*, see the Lesson Background.

^{1b} Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

One day near the end of Herod's reign, certain *Magi* show up in the capital city. The word Magi is actually a transliteration (not a translation) of the original Greek. The same word is used in the

old Greek version of [Daniel 1:20](#); [2:2](#), [10](#), [27](#); [4:7](#); [5:7](#), [15](#), where it is usually translated “magicians.” They are not like the sleight-of-hand magicians of today, but are of a caste of mysterious holy men. They are experts in astrology, medicine, history, and politics. They serve as counselors in royal courts and are revered as experts on the unseen worlds of nature and the gods.

HOW TO SAY IT

Babylon *Bab-uh-lun*.

Bethlehem *Beth-lih-hem*.

Edomites *Ee-dum-ites*.

frankincense *frank-in-sense*.

Galilee *Gal-uh-lee*.

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

Herod *Hair-ud*.

Idumaeans *Id-you-me-un*.

Magi *May-jye* or *Madge-eye*.

Mesopotamia *Mes-uh-puh-tay-me-uh*.

Messiah *Meh-sigh-uh*.

messianic *mess-ee-an-ick*.

myrrh *mur*.

Nehemiah *Nee-huh-my-uh*.

Persia *Per-zhuh*.

The fact that these men come *from the east* indicates that they are not emissaries of the Roman Empire, since Rome is located to the west. A point of origin in the area of Babylon and Mesopotamia would explain their familiarity with Judaism, since they would have had contact with communities of Jews whose ancestors had remained in that area since the days of Nehemiah and Ezra. Because Magi—called “wise men” in other versions of the Bible—are often attached to royal courts, it is reasonable to assume that they have been sent as a delegation to welcome the birth of a new Jewish king; this theory may explain their lavish gifts, noted below.

B. Clear Goal ([v. 2](#))

² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

Since the Magi are seeking *the one who has been born king of the Jews*, they naturally come looking in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish faith and culture. Exactly how and why *his star* has directed the quest is something of a mystery. If the nature of the travelers’ wisdom includes

astrology, then they are accustomed to seeking signs of impending world events in the heavenly bodies. It seems most likely that something unusual has transpired that involves a celestial body associated with the Jewish people. Comparing these observations with the wise men's religious research, they conclude that a new Jewish king has been born.

But have they concluded that this recently born child is the Messiah, promised to come through the Jewish people? If so, has it been their contact with Jews living in the Persian Empire to the east that has made them aware of Daniel's prophecies of a divine kingdom that will last forever ([Daniel 2:44, 45](#); etc.)?

These are tantalizing questions with uncertain answers. In any case, the Magi seek *to worship* the new king. Tradition says that the men are three in number, but the text does not say that.

II. Probing for Information

([Matthew 2:3-8](#))

A. Knowing Whom to Ask ([vv. 3-6](#))

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

As the Magi naturally look for the new "king of the Jews" in the city of the current king, little can they know the effect their visit will have on that paranoid ruler *and all Jerusalem with him*. People who have vested interests in maintaining the status quo do not want that status quo disturbed (compare [John 11:48](#))!

⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

Herod's logic in consulting the religious leaders of the Jews is unclear. Why does he assume that the appearance of the Magi has anything to do with a *Messiah*, real or fake? Perhaps the wise men themselves have suggested that the star has something to do with the coming of a Messiah, although Matthew does portray them as fully aware of the implications of the sign of the star they had seen.

Does Herod make the association between these strange visitors and ancient prophecies of a coming Christ himself? If so, does he really believe he can undermine God's plan? Perhaps he doubts the integrity of the Magi, believing that they are in league with rebels who seek to foment insurrection by stirring up the religious sentiments of the masses; or, more likely, he fears that the sensation created by the appearance of the wise men may be capitalized on by his political enemies, real or imagined.

^{5,6} "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

The priests and teachers of the law refer Herod to [Micah 5:2](#). This passage predicts the appearance of a ruler of Israel who will come from Bethlehem. The ruling of Israel in [5:2](#) and providing for Israel in [5:4](#) (not quoted here) strongly resembles what was said of David in [2 Samuel 5:2](#); [1 Chronicles 11:2](#). Although Micah prophesied more than seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, first-century Jews still hold the prophecy dear. The prevailing interpretation of [Micah 5:2](#) and other prophecies is that the Messiah will take the lead in purging the land of foreign influences and restore devotion to Israel's God (compare [Acts 1:6](#)).

B. Knowing Whom to Trust ([vv. 7, 8](#))

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

Realizing the possible political implications of the Magi's disturbing report, paranoid Herod begins his own search for the Messiah. His inquiry regarding *the exact time the star had appeared* is an issue of year and month, not time of day. Even without reading the rest of the account, at a minimum the question seems designed to calculate the age of the new "king of the Jews." Knowledge is power, and with knowledge of the location (Bethlehem) and age of the Messiah (time the star appeared), Herod will have the upper hand, or so he must think.

⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

There is no indication that the Magi fail to answer Herod's question in the previous verse truthfully; the unrecorded answer to the query about the time of the star's appearance leads Herod to conclude that the person the wise men seek is a *child*. The Magi apparently see no reason to doubt Herod's motives in his questioning and his declared intent to *go and worship him* also.

But all this must be evaluated in light of Herod's political cunning, his murderous track record, and his paranoia. Even with no knowledge of Herod's murderous actions in [Matthew 2:13, 16-18](#), history tells us of his evil character. In that light, his self-preservation instincts must be in overdrive. If political enemies are hatching a scheme involving a baby from Bethlehem to put forward as a challenger to his throne, any show of force could alert the rebels and allow them to move the child elsewhere.

Herod therefore decides to let the Magi locate the child for him. The assumption may be that their efforts will not arouse the suspicions of the imagined rebels. Herod's stated desire to worship serves to reinforce the Magi's understanding that the one they seek must be more than the heir-apparent son of an ordinary political king.

III. Worshipping the King

([Matthew 2:9-12](#))

A. Right Place, Right Time ([vv. 9, 10](#))

9. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

The wording of this verse in the original Greek text is difficult and has given rise to much speculation about the exact nature of *the star they had seen when it rose*. Matthew seems to imply that as the Magi depart Jerusalem they suddenly see the same star they had earlier seen in their eastern homeland, the one that had led them to travel to Israel.

But ordinary stars do not move through the sky and linger over specific geographical locations. This fact has led many scholars to speculate that the Magi actually view a planet or comet. Scientific explanations, however, miss the point of the story: whether a star, a planet, or something else, God continues to lead the wise men in their long journey to find the true king of the Jews.



Point to this visual as you ask your learners what they have heard about these three roles as they relate to Jesus.

10. **When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.**

We note that the Magi's experience of being *overjoyed* is not over seeing Jesus, but rather over seeing *the star*. Perhaps their experiences with Herod, his officials, and the Jewish religious leaders has unsettled them. Doubtless they are confused to discover that no king of the Jews has

been born in the palace. Perhaps they have begun to doubt whether they have correctly interpreted the signs, wondering if their long journey is at a dead end. The sudden reappearance of the star renews their hopes.

B. Good Attitude, Great Gifts ([v. 11](#))

¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Modern nativity sets often include figurines of the Magi presenting gifts to Jesus as he lies in the manger. This suggests that the Magi are there with the shepherds who come after the angel announces the birth to them ([Luke 2:7-20](#)). But Matthew indicates that the Magi meet Mary in a *house*, with no reference to the manger.

This fact, plus the note in [Matthew 2:16](#) that Herod massacres all the male children in Bethlehem age two years and under, has led many scholars to suggest that the wise men arrive in Bethlehem several months after Jesus' birth. On the other hand, Luke's reference to a manger allows the possibility that Jesus was taken into a house soon after being born. Therefore the timeframe of the Magi's visit can be anywhere from a day or two after Jesus' birth up to a dozen or more months later.

In any case, the actions of the wise men create a striking and deliberate contrast with the earlier scenes in the story. On one hand, Herod, the king of the Jews, is now on the alert to a possible rival, and the Jewish priests and scribes cannot be bothered to travel from Jerusalem to see their new Messiah, their new Christ.

On the other hand, pagan travelers from another country—men with comparatively little understanding of Israel's God or his requirements—have completed a long, dangerous journey to bow before Jesus and present him with lavish gifts. *Frankincense and myrrh* are exotic and expensive spices used as key ingredients in ancient perfumes and ointments; the *gold* the travelers bring likely represents more money than a peasant couple such as Joseph and Mary will see in a lifetime. The actions of the Magi reflect a prominent theme in Old Testament messianic prophecies, the theme of Gentiles (like the Magi) coming to Jerusalem to worship the Christ (see [Isaiah 11:10](#); [14:1](#); [49:6](#); [60:1-3](#); etc.).

C. Spiritual Insight, Wise Choice ([v. 12](#))

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

God has not only helped the wise men on their way, leading them to the object of their quest, he also makes provisions for their safe return home. Although Herod has instructed them to return with news of the child's location, they instead make their exit toward *their country by another route*.

The Magi seem to have had no warning or inkling of the danger posed by Herod until they are *warned in a dream*. Herod is likely aware (or becomes aware) that that [Micah 5](#) passage also predicts that the Messiah from Bethlehem will go forth to destroy the invaders and their pagan religious customs. To Herod, this can mean only a challenge to his own pro-Roman policies. Periodic insurrections are not unknown in this time and place (compare [Acts 5:36, 37](#)), and Herod is infamous for eliminating opposition.

Conclusion

A. Speaking Our Language

Missionaries and Bible translators often stress the importance of speaking God's truth in the native language, or "heart language," of people who do not know Christ. Today's story is a remarkable illustration of how far God will go to communicate to those who seek to know him.

The Old Testament condemns undue attention to stars ([Deuteronomy 4:19](#); etc.) and takes an unfavorable view of those who do ([Isaiah 47:13](#); etc.). Yet Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus features both a star as a sign and stargazers who interpret it as such! Although God prefers to reveal himself through spokespersons whose messages become Scripture, the Magi seemed not to have had access to the book of Micah. So God spoke to them in a "language" they could understand.

The wise men seem the least likely category of people to play a part in the story of Jesus' birth. Yet their willingness to follow God's lead in the face of great peril made them spectators to the greatest event in history: the entry of the Son of God into the world. God knows hearts, and he perceived that these men would seek him faithfully despite danger if given an opportunity. They did. Do you?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, guide our steps as you did those of the wise men! May those steps lead us ever faithfully toward Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God will light the way for those
who seek to bring him glory.